

# LEADERSHIP

## Do Not Forget To Feed Your Chimp!

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Tom Phillips

Have you ever 'lost it' in the workplace? A colleague or manager says or does something and that red mist descends over you. You then say or do something that you later regret but, at the time, it is almost like you have become a different person, someone who you don't recognise as being yourself and certainly someone your colleagues will not recognise.

If you can relate to the above, there's a good chance that in such a situation your chimp took over! The Chimp Paradox is a best selling book and self-management principle by Dr Steve Peters. Such eminent figures as Steven Gerrard and Sir Chris Hoy credit Peters and his theory for a huge part in their success. They have both worked with him at an individual level and, in 2015, Roy Hodgson famously invited Peters to work with the England squad.

In his book, Dr Peters talks about the fact that our brains can be divided into distinct regions:

- the limbic or 'Chimp' region that controls our emotions and provides emotional responses to the external world
- the human region that seeks to rationalise our experiences in the external world
- the computer region, which seeks to run systems and processes that simplify our lives by effectively automating our responses to certain



### Don't let your chimp take over!

situations based on how we responded to those situations previously.

In reality, chimps are very aggressive animals. They are faster and stronger than humans - and so it is with our brains. If we allow our chimp to take over, it will wreak havoc as its responses are primal, emotional and irrational. In the wild, chimps are concerned with two main things - survival and propagation of the species. Our 'inner chimp' gives us defence mechanisms that are essential, but not always necessary. Herein lies the

paradox; we need our chimp, but only some of the time .

### How do you know when your chimp is in charge?

Ask yourself the following questions when dealing with people or situations that make you feel uncomfortable:

- Do I want to be having these thoughts?
- Do I want to be having these emotions?

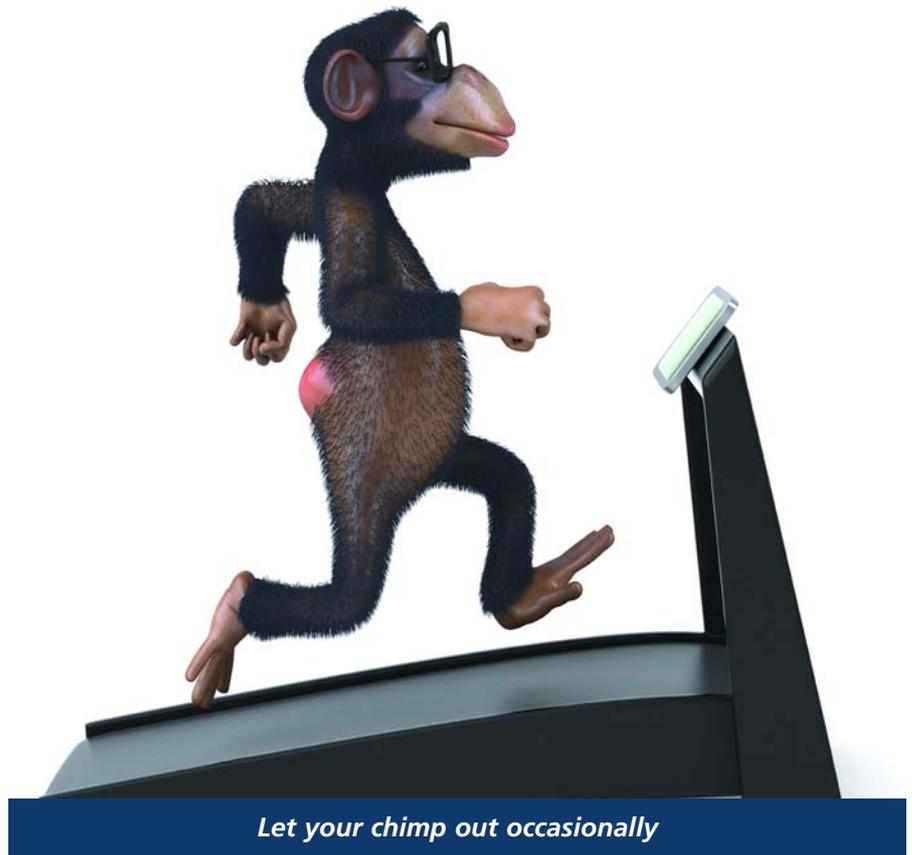
- Do I want to behave in this way?

If the answer is 'no' to any or all of these questions, there is a good chance your simian is in control.

## Dealing with your chimp

Dr. Peters (quite rightly) points out that you should not attempt to tackle your chimp head on. In a battle between a chimp and an unarmed human, the chimp would win easily. The results for the human would be bloody and bruising, possibly even fatal. Dr. Peters suggests the following strategy to deal with your chimp:

- 1) **Let the chimp out of its cage.** Every now and again, we need to let our chimp get out and let off steam. Find a private room and vent your spleen! Scream at the walls, stamp your feet and do whatever it takes to get rid of that pent-up frustration that another individual or situation is causing. Go to the gym and pound the living daylight out of the treadmill or slam the weights around like there is no tomorrow! In this environment, such behavior is normal and accepted. Your chimp will be in good company!
- 2) **Allow your human brain to work with your chimp.** Once you have vented, examine the facts of the situation objectively. This is what your human does extremely well. Did your colleague really mean to put you down with that throwaway comment during the team meeting or has your chimp just taken exception to an otherwise harmless comment? Does your boss always reject all of your ideas or have they just rejected this one idea? This is where a coach or mentor is a good idea. Someone who can help you analyse a situation objectively.
- 3) **Change your computer programmes.** Give some serious thought to the thoughts, feelings and behaviours you display when dealing with certain people or situations. If you 'hate' 1:1s with your boss, is it any wonder that you feel nervous about them and then act in



a corresponding manner? Allow your human to identify what exactly it is that you find uncomfortable about 1:1s. It may be that you feel your boss does not give you enough autonomy. Once you have identified this fact, you can then start to develop a strategy to deal with it. You may want to discuss your need for greater autonomy with your boss. Once you realise this, you are effectively changing the computer programme called 'I hate 1:1s' to a programme called 'I could find 1:1s more effective and enjoyable by changing my thought patterns and behaviours'.

- 4) **Reward your chimp.** Once you have gone through the previous steps, give yourself a pat on the back! This may involve a physical reward as well, but at the very least acknowledge that you have recognised a way in which your chimp gets riled and you have dealt with it. Your chimp is still alive and healthy, but it is now back in its cage, enjoying a well earned banana.

Dr. Peters also makes the following points that are worth considering here:

- **Chimps change behaviour when their old behaviours are ineffective.**

A chimp will learn very quickly that trying to take bananas from a tree full of poisonous spiders is a painful experience. As humans, we need to take responsibility for changing ineffective behaviours, thoughts and feelings. We have evolved to a higher mental and emotional plan than our primate ancestors!

- **Chimps do not carry feelings of guilt.** Accept that, every now and again, your chimp will 'play up'. If it does and you lose control of it, accept that it has happened, learn from the situation and move on. Learn how to control your chimp in similar situations in the future.
- **You are not responsible for the nature of your chimp.** Our chimp brain is genetically inherited. You are however, responsible for the actions of your chimp.
- **In any situation, there is a stimulus and a range of possible responses.** You may not be able to control the stimulus, but you can and should control your response.

**Good luck in feeding your chimp!**